

New Fiction from Henry Kronk: “We Found Out”

“What do you think?” he asked.

“I don’t know,” she said.

“Could be an ambush.”

“Could be.”

“But here? The corps is miles back.”

“Looks like it broke down.”

It was true. Steam trailed through the windows in the engine. Driggs could see the shimmer of heat from the stack all this way off without the binos. The tracks went through a wooded stretch, but the high desert loomed off in the distance and vegetation grew sparse. They could see intermittent open stretches along a length of the train. And in those stretches, no cigarettes burned, no bayonets glinted, no enemy moved. Not that Driggs could see.

“Let’s take a look.”

“Let’s report back to Captain first.”

Driggs looked from Cote’s left eye across her freckled nose to her right and back to her left. Cote gazed, unblinking, back. She broke the silence.

“You know about Captain’s and Donwalla’s beef. You were at muster this morning. You were standing right next to me when he leaned in with his pink cheeks and spat in my face. Shouldn’t be wearing my SSI for the 3rd Rangers? Are you shitting me? After what happened? Driggs, the man doesn’t trust us. He doesn’t like us. He has no faith in us. Until we

do something about that, we're on our own."

Cote had been blessed with the gifts of persuasion. Driggs had been wary of this fact since soldier onlining in Tacoma. Despite the war, one night she had gotten her hands on a bottle of whiskey. When half of it was gone, she then had talked Driggs into climbing one of the base's mobile towers. From the top, they could see Mt. Rainier in the moonlight and, to the north, the remnants of Seattle still smoldering.

"The Janks could be back any minute," Cote broke in again. "If we take this back to Captain, he'll chew us out for not taking a closer look. And then he'll round up a half dozen more experienced rangers and investigate. And if-if-this freighter is still around when they come back in a couple hours, they're going to keep all the scotch and cigars they find for themselves."

Driggs twitched. Cote chewed a twig and stared o at the train. It didn't resemble any commuters or freights he'd seen. It was black and dilapidated. It looked like the trains from the pictures he'd seen in his history textbook.



Finally, he spat. "Ok, we take a closer look. And then we report back."

Driggs scrambled down the blue face after Cote. He jumped the last ten feet and skidded through the scree. The two rangers made their way forward, hugging the red pines and stopping every 100 yards to listen and scan. Only hawk calls broke the silence, along with their own footsteps, which were impossible to stifle on the tinder-dry pine needles.

Whenever the sirens used to blow and they sheltered in their basement, Driggs' father would always tell him by the light of their LED lantern about how he took up smoking on the day of November 3rd, 2062.

"It was then that me and just about everyone else in Port Angeles knew for sure that the house was divided against itself," he used to say. "You had President-Elect Morrison parading across screens and broadcasts, celebrating his 92% landslide victory over the so-called 'Supreme Commander.' We thought he was such a plushed-up load of wash—the 'General' or whatever else he was calling himself. He really showed us. Suddenly, everyone realizes we're not hearing a chirp from regions all across the country. The Southwest, the Rockies, the Midwest, the Mid-Atlantic, Alaska, Florida, Maine—they all went dark. Nothing. 404 Error Page Not Found. Then we heard rumors about the transport and information sector sabotage, the round ups, the murders.

I walked to the corner store and asked for a pack and a lighter. Red Robert who owned the place knew all too well I was 14. He didn't say a thing to me. Didn't even look at me. He just kept staring at his screen.

I walked home, sat on the front porch, and I'll always remember this: The Church of Latter Day Saints across the street, they'd put up a new sign a few days before. It said,

'Free trip to Heaven! Details inside.' I hated it and I loved it. I wanted to believe it. I wanted somewhere to escape to. I wanted faith. But all I had was a pack of smokes. I flicked my butts at that sign all afternoon."

There in the high desert, twelve years after his father had passed, Driggs remembered the last cigarette he had smoked with painful clarity. When the word got out that tobacco rations had been cut altogether three weeks back, he started measuring his supplies. He took out his three remaining packs from the waterproof pocket in the top of his rucksack. He lined the blank government issued labels side by side. Two were full, and four remained in the third. He took out two darts, lit them at the same time, and resigned himself to two a day for the next three weeks. Maybe by that time, things would change.

Six days and twelve cigarettes in, the Third Rangers made it over the Cascades and down onto the plains. Screening the movement of the main corps, his unit skirted the edge of the forest. Then they were ordered to scout ahead. Intelligence believed a Jank division sat camped some miles off and were backed up by guerrilla mountain people, no less.

At dusk, the corps was 10 miles back, and dark clouds began to pour over the foothills to the West like slow-flowing lava. Captain Donwalla ordered the rangers to camp. They posted sentries, ate a cold supper, and staked out their bivouacs for the night. Cote had wandered off to piss. When she came back, she told Driggs about a cave she'd found and how there was room for two. And then the rain started coming down by the gallon. Driggs gathered up his roll and followed her through the storm. It was some ways out and it took Cote ten minutes wandering around before she found it again. But a cave it was, and it was dry. The two laid out their rolls and soon were sound asleep.

They woke at first light, collected their things, and headed down the gentle slope. Mist hung just above the treetops. Their fellow rangers' shelters lay among the pines glistening from the rain.

"How about that," Cote said. "First ones up. Guess that proves Donwalla does sleep after all."

But as Driggs stepped beyond the next tree, his captain's eyes met him with a stare. He wheeled about in horror. Donwalla's high-and-tight head was pinned to the tree with a rebar stake. His body was nowhere to be seen.

Driggs ran over to the nearest bivvy and kicked it. No response. Same with the next. And the next. Looking closer, he saw knife cuts through the denier nylon.

"We need to get out of here," Driggs said to Cote, who was slumped down below Donwalla's head with her rifle raised.

"Cote!"

Cote held up her hand, and Driggs clammed up. He caught some movement at his 2:00. And then Cote's rifle went off and a body fell in the distance.

"Go," she whispered.

Shots responded. The instinct for survival lifted Driggs' feet with the momentum of generations, tipping him onward.

After they reported back to the Colonel, Driggs smoked every cigarette he had left. Their unit, the Third Rangers, which now numbered two, was dissolved and absorbed by the Fourth.

They could see the train through the trees now and they began to smell the faint smell of death.

"Are those dogs barking?"

Driggs stopped walking and listened.

"Not dogs ... vultures."

They followed the sound and sure enough came upon the bodies of three horses beside the first car. After pausing for a few, the rangers approached.

They hadn't been dead long. Their coats still gleamed and the few carrion birds that had arrived were only just beginning to battle over the choice spots. Driggs could see no apparent cause of death.

"If these horses just died, where's the smell coming from?"

Cote shook her head. A trail of blood ran on toward the train. They followed it across the coupling and around the other side.

A Jank lay slumped against a wheel. He wore a moustache not unlike the one Driggs' father used to grow. His bewildered eyes gazed up into the muzzles of Driggs' and Cote's rifles. With his left hand, he clutched his right arm. It had been severed off cleanly—surgically—below the elbow. His sand-colored uniform was stained crimson down one side.

"What happened?" Cote whispered.

The dying man raised his eyes.

"Do you have a cigarette?"

"No." They said in unison.

His mouth went slack. And he lowered his gaze to the horizon.

"What happened?" Driggs said and nudged the dying man's stump with his muzzle.

He gasped and, in racking breaths: "We—we—we—we ..."

"We what?"

"We found ... out."

He used his last breath to say his last word. His left arm dropped and his head swung forward.

"Found out what?"

"Fuck knows. Check him and them." Cote gestured to a distance away from the train where a half dozen dead Janks lay lined up in a neat row. "I'm going inside."

Like the horses, none of these Janks bore any visible wounds. Driggs searched their khaki pockets. He found a locket holding the picture of a woman that could be a mother or a wife to the late wearer, a stained embroidered handkerchief, some worn polaroid porn, two journals, a deck of cards, fishing line and three lures, along with the six Jank regulation canteens, carbines, clasp knives, fire pods, watches, bivouacs, and extra rounds. The unit leader, one Captain Harrison, also carried a pair of binos, a compass, a spot device, and one melted 'government' issued Jank chocolate bar. Driggs tore open the package and shoved the melted bar in his mouth. He tightly closed his front teeth and slowly pulled the plastic out, trapping the chocolate within.

When Driggs was 17, Jank guerrillas blew up the Port Angeles supply stockpile. He and most of the others started walking south towards Olympia. The rumors were that the Mounties at the Canadian border had orders to shoot migrants on sight. Still, some scraped supplies together and set off in boats hoping to land somewhere on Vancouver Island or to venture further north and seek shelter with the Haida.

With his father dead and his mother off running a field hospital somewhere around Fort Vancouver, he loaded up a

backpack and headed south alone. He walked from sunrise to sundown and on a little further, lighting the way with his headlamp. The road was full of others like himself.

When the sun rose the next morning, he carried on. Toward noon around Briedablick, Driggs found himself in open farm land, with the Olympic range framing the horizon. The road ran beside a river bordered by blackberry bushes and poplars. Two quads motored up towards him, traveling in the opposite direction. It was two shirtless boys with shapeless torsos, younger than Driggs. As they neared, they slowed, and then stopped ten feet away. One showed him his shotgun.

"You can stop right there."

Driggs stopped.

"Put your pack on the ground and empty your pockets."

"I don't have any money or much of value. I'm heading to—"

"PUT your pack on the ground. And empty your pockets."

One of the boys' quads had a trailer fixed to it. Driggs saw other packs, suitcases, and miscellaneous gear in the back.

Then all three heard a ping followed by the sprinkling of glass. The left rearview mirror of the quad ridden by the boy with the shotgun had been shot off. A sandy-haired young woman wearing tan waders with a fishing net on her belt walked slowly up from the river bank with a rifle under her cheek.

"The next one is going through your ear if you don't throw that shotgun down."

The unarmed boy towing the load looked to his friend.

"Do it, Jackson."

Jackson tossed his shotgun on to the pavement.

"Good job. Why don't you go pick that up?" Driggs knew she was talking to him. He walked forward and grabbed the gun. The woman now hurried forward to face the boys.

"If it were olden days, I'd say you boys are going to hell, robbing refugees in times like this. But we're past that now. I guess I'll say you better think about how you treat your fellow humans, otherwise you're bound to wind up dead. Get out of here."

The boys fired up their quads without a word and rode them past. At last, the woman lowered her rifle.

"My name's Cote."

"Driggs."

"Driggs!"

He turned to see Cote's head poking out the doorway of the engine.

"Come on and check this out."

He sneezed as he entered the cloud of dust in the engine car. Cote had her undershirt up over her nose. It was hot; fuel still burned in the engine. A fine layer of dust covered the controls, the sills, every surface. It blew like smoke out into the car behind. The only marks in the dust were their own.

"Cote—what the...?"

"What?"

"What's with the dust?"

"It was windy last night."

"The windows are closed."

"The door's open."

"This isn't sand."

"Whatever. Look at this." Cote held a piece of a single piece of paper with a dull red seal at the bottom corner. "Can you read it?"

Driggs brought it into the light, but it was so heavily mildewed that the words had been all but completely obscured. He saw marks that looked like '□□□□.'

"Not a chance."

They jumped out and headed to the next car. Driggs struggled to pull the iron latch down, and it creaked along the way. They needed to push together just to crack the door ajar. But the second they had it open, they were hit with a wave of aroma and moisture. Cote and Driggs climbed in to another world.

All was dark and dank; heavy and hard to breathe. Driggs had to sit down. An aisle ran down the center of the car and, on either side, there were dense rows of lush plants. Their green stretched out, down, and up toward the glass-paned ceiling.

Orange-purple flowers sprang from the gaps in the husky trunks and yellow fruit hung in bunches.

"What on earth ..."

Driggs wandered closer. He'd never seen flowers like these. And now that he was close, he could smell the ripeness of the fruit. He picked off a bunch and brought them to his mouth, bit, chewed, and swallowed.

"Cote!"

"What the hell, Driggs?"

"Try this fruit!"

Cote grabbed her own bunch. A second passed.

"Jesus on a jet plane! That's good!"

"Hehehe, pretty tasty, aren't they?"

The laugh sounded a guttural baritone and echoed throughout the car. Driggs and Cote froze. In the corner, a dark figure rose from a sitting position in the shadows.

"FREEZE JANK." Juice ran in a stream from Cote's chin down on to the stock of her raised rifle.

The shadow raised its hands and spoke. "*Hinene*. There is no need, for I am unarmed."

"Where is this train headed?"

The figure walked forward. He was tall and wore a black coat with tails. A black, brimmed hat hid his downturned face from view.

"The official documents say Seattle, but its true destination is Vancouver, and on from there."

"Seattle? But our forces are all the way south to Bend."

"The present conflict between your state and your opponent's state does not concern me."

"Well then how'd you get all this fruit past the Jank inspectors?"

"They're called chupas, and I have a few cards up my sleeve."

"Are those cards Verified Greenbacks?"

"Hehehe oh no."

"Why'd you break down?"

"I didn't. I received word your forces have pulled up the tracks a few miles north. I just stopped." He drew these final words out.

"Who are those Janks outside?"

"Part of a platoon from the Army of the Supreme Comander."

"Why are they dead?"

"Why? Were you family?"

"No, but—"

"Why's the engine so dusty?" Driggs' voice cracked.

The figure paused, slowly turning his head. "I like it that way."

"So, what is this? What—" Cote paused. Her rifle dipped. "—what are you bringing north? Why are there a half a dozen dead bodies outside? It's time to start making some sense here pal."

"Why don't you see for yourself?"

Driggs' mouth opened wider. Cote stomped her foot.

"Whatever man. First, I want you to step forward. Driggs, go pat him down."

When Driggs slapped the figure's breast pocket, a hollow thud sounded. Out of it emerged an unopened pack of Marlboro Reds.

"Want a smoke?"

The figure raised his head to reveal a pale grin.

Outside, his skin looked even paler. Nicotine washed over Driggs in gentle waves. Despite the heat and the black dress,

the man did not sweat.

"What's your name?"

Cote had already finished her cigarette, after dragging furiously with it clenched between her teeth. She still held her rifle raised with both hands. The man offered her one more.

"You can call me Jo."

"Where are you from?"

"Down south."

Driggs finished his cigarette and took one more. They all smoked in silence down to the filter.

"Ok, let's see the rest of the train."

"Yes Private Cote. I have another car of the chupas here." He gestured inside the following dank container. "Their root can be used to mix a psychedelic tea. Many find it heals afflictions of the nerves and the mind. It can also serve as an undetectable poison in highly concentrated doses."

Jo cracked the latch on the car and thrust it effortlessly open. Cote and Driggs followed him inside to the close air.

"Chupas have an amazing ability to regenerate if injured."

He reached out and snapped off a green outgrowth.

"And their shoots make for an excellent salad addition."

He popped it in his mouth.

"Look."

Driggs and Cote bent close. In the place where the shoot had grown, already another young outgrowth had emerged to replace it.

"I love these organisms for their structure. Human society for centuries now has prized and supported the lone individual, The Napoleons, the Michael Jordans, The Supreme Comandante who overthrew the hold of the technologists that bound him."

"That's not us, pal."

"But he's still in charge, isn't he?"

"Down there he is."

"It makes no difference. The purpose of life is to live, to love, and to spread life and love. And with luck, new creations will do the same. Over the years, organisms typically do one thing well. They either love well and spread love, or they live well and spread life. Too often, they destroy life to spread love or destroy love to spread life. They see things as a competition. But these chupas strike a balance. Like the poplar, or the hive, or the rhizome, they have no conception of the individual. They may appear to be single organisms, even being potted here individually for more convenient transportation. But in the wild, they exist as a network. Each grove represents a hub of chupa life. If one falls ill or suffers damage, others will divert resources to help it rebuild. In potting them like this, I have done them a great injury. I hope they will forgive me."

"So this is what all those Janks got jacked up for?"

"I doubt those men had seen a chupa in their lives."

"Look, Jo," Cote scratched her narrow hip. "These plants are great and all, but we need to get this tour moving so we can make our report to our superior. And I'm also gonna need another of those Reds."

"As you wish, Private Cote."

The next car was refreshingly cool, refrigerated well below the heat outside. The walls were lined with illuminated glass

cases filled with glass cylinders. The cylinders were filled with liquid, and through the liquid floated particulate matter.

“What’s in those?”

“Other creatures. Well, their DNA at least.”

Driggs coughed. He remembered his mother’s lab where she collected dead specimens in jars. Always in the evening, after her office hours had ended, his father sent him down there to call her for dinner. She left her work with gravity. Driggs’ older brother and sister had died of the measles. His own cheeks and forehead still bore the scars from when he had it. His mother would talk about how humans once knew how to cure and vaccinate against it. But since the Breach, doctors in the Resistance had lost much knowledge.

“What creatures?” Cote still held her rifle pointed between Jo’s shoulder blades, though she had lowered it to her hip.

“Some of my favorites. The cuttlefish, the bonobo, the venus fly trap. The three-toed sloth—they’re cute. I very nearly made room for the Welsh Corgi too ...”

“Why aren’t the chupas in one of those?”

“Well, they can’t bear fruit if they’re just DNA in a test tube, can they?”

In other cars, Jo showed Driggs and Cote an assortment of bins filled with precious gems and earth metals, jagged materials that glinted with sunlight. Another held rows of filing cabinets. In another, they found dusty shelves full of old holy books, all written in honor and glory to the creator.

They walked back outside just before the caboose. Jo turned and said, “I want to tell you about a people I once knew.

When once, they were lonesome, I took them in. They had nowhere to go, no values to live by. I gave them purpose. When

once, the yoke wore and wore till it fit too snug, I handed them the axe. I gave them the grinder, the haft, and the bronze point to crown it.

I bade them to rise up against their enslavers in Mizraim, and brought them to the land which I promised unto their fathers; and I said, 'I will never break my covenant.' I parted the waters.

When once, and many times more, fires of rival tribes burned too close, I raised the spirit in them and sent rider after rider galloping down the mountainside. I cared for them like children, and in return, they called me father.

They were very much like you—taking up arms, offering their lives to further their cause, even under a commander who thinks you should have perished alongside your comrades and his rival whom he hated. I know they would recognize you both as a brother and a sister in arms in the fight to preserve life and love.”

Driggs felt his vision go warm and hazy. A low buzzing became audible. He realized that he was slowly nodding. Cote fixed him with a quizzical expression, and he quickly regained his focus. Jo was still talking.

“With them and with those that came before, I built a beautiful society of plants, mammals, fungi, cetaceans, bacteria, Noah, Abraham, Lot, and countless other houses, domains, and families.

But these great men and women have passed. Like rain upon the mountain, they have all passed. As the years went on, fewer and fewer loved me. Some claimed they had killed me. And now, I fear the conflict between your warring factions will destroy all I—all we—have built. I ask that you grant me safe passage. I carry with me only life and love. All I ask is you help me spread it. Go unto your commanders and rally your brothers and sisters with my message. Re-lay the tracks south of Bend and

allow me safe passage north."

The sound of Jo's voice died away slowly in the dry desert air. Driggs looked from Jo to Cote. He was about to speak. And then—

"What's in that car?" Cote asked, sucking on another red, pointing with her thumb over her shoulder to the caboose of the train.

"That—that car holds more chupas."

"Uh-huh."

The buzzing subsided. Driggs stood up straight and raised his voice. "Why aren't those chupas with the others at the front of the train?"

"I wasn't sure if I'd have room."

Cote looked from her fellow ranger to Jo.

"Go open it, Driggs."

"It might interest you to know a unit of the Commander's cavalry will arrive within minutes. I can only delay them for so long. I beg you, make your report."

"I don't hear anything except those vultures."

Cote pointed her rifle at Jo again.

"Open it, Driggs."

Driggs started walking toward the caboose. Jo looked to Driggs and back to Cote, who kept her rifle raised.

Impossibly fast, Jo crouched to the ground and threw sand in Cote's face.

"Driggs!"

He wheeled around to see Jo flying across the sand. His knees collided with Driggs chest and knocked him to the ground.

"I thought I could convince you—I thought I could inspire you," Jo spat, his face growing taunt and drawn beneath his black brim. "But it appears you're like the others. And like the Amakelites, you shan't be spared. It is written."

At that moment a bullet passed through Jo's head from jaw hinge to jaw hinge. He was knocked sideways off Driggs. Cote sprung forward, running toward the caboose door. Jo rose unscathed.

"NO," he shouted. Driggs felt his bones vibrate. Cote made it to the door and popped the hinge down with the butt of her rifle. A sound like a shell blast emitted from the car. The door exploded open and Cote and Driggs were lifted from the ground and thrown through the air. Cote struck a tree and landed unconscious among the dry needles.

Driggs landed hard a few dozen feet away and scrambled over to his fellow ranger. But before he could rouse her, he raised his head to watch the train. A kind of smoke or cloud was issuing from the caboose. Behind it, he saw what looked like masses of limbs and pulsing organs. They were hit with a wave of stench. It smelled like thousands of nameless carcasses left to rot under the sun. Soundless bolts of lightning flashed, followed by a howling gale. Jo stood beside the train, but had inexplicably grown in size. He grew larger still, towering over the train, seeking to contain the cloud with his hat. His enormous bare head revealed tattoos of ancient characters and deep, purple scars.

Fire, ice, toil, and sickness flew from the open caboose, igniting the forest floor beside the tracks. The wind from the train spurred the fire on, toward where Driggs and Cote lay. Driggs hoisted Cote over his shoulder and ran north along the track. Past the train, he crossed the ties and made his way

into the forest. He knelt and laid Cote on the ground. After gently lowering her head, his hand came away bloody, and he uncorked his canteen to splash water on his friend's face.

Through the storm issuing from the train, he shouted her name. Her eyes flickered.

"Cote, we have to go!"

Her eyes snapped open, her jaw clenched, and her hand thrust up to catch Driggs' shoulder.

"Help me up."

The rangers ran back toward the blue and scrambled up it. At the top, they collapsed with heaving chests and looked back. The fire had spread impossibly fast. It had crossed the tracks, and approached in their direction.

"Look."

A section of the horizon shimmered.

"What is that?"

"Hell is murky."

Driggs raised his binos. Three Jank columns marched forward. Refocusing, he saw cavalry units peppering the sparse forest. Driggs looked back to the train. The now-massive Jo still battled amongst the storm that issued from the caboose. A noise sounded at their nine and the two looked up to see incoming Resistance birds.

"Wonder what good they'll do."

"Maybe a little more damage than my rifle."

The two watched as the aircraft rained down missiles onto the Jank cavalry and into the cloud in which Jo was now obscured. Upon contact, the train erupted and flung ash and smoke miles

overhead. Below, the fire drew nearer and nearer.

“Cote.”

She looked at her ranger in arms. Driggs held out the half empty pack of Reds, with one protruding in her direction.

“They were knocked loose when that thing had me down.”

“Driggs,” Cote said, lighting up, “you’re one hell of a ranger.”

Lauren Johnson Interviews Amy Waldman, Author of ‘A Door in the Earth’

Amy Waldman’s novel, A Door in the Earth, follows Parveen, a young Afghan-American woman who returns to her war-torn homeland after discovering a memoir by humanitarian Gideon Crane. Parveen is not the only American influenced by the book; Mother Afghanistan has become a bible for American counterinsurgency operations in the country. If part of that story rings familiar, it is: The book-within-a-book was inspired by Three Cups of Tea, Greg Mortenson’s 2006 memoir of building schools in Afghanistan and Pakistan, which was later revealed to be largely fabricated.

I was one of the legions of soldiers who read and fell head over steel-toed boots for Mortenson’s story. Like Waldman’s protagonist, I ultimately found myself in a remote corner of Afghanistan in 2009. As a military information operations officer, I was charged with “winning hearts and minds”—an instrument of the “kind power” advocated by Gideon Crane. I

didn't share Parveen's Afghan heritage, but I see my younger self in her idealism and naivety. I feel the crushing blow when expectations and reality clash.

*I relate these parallels to Waldman before our interview, and she begins by asking me questions about my experience—curiosity cultivated through a career in journalism, but also desire to learn, to investigate, to understand. Waldman's first novel, *The Submission*, explores the aftereffects of 9/11 on American soil, imagining what might happen if a Muslim-American wins a blind competition to design a Ground Zero Memorial. *A Door in the Earth* is her second novel.*

Lauren Johnson: You worked as a reporter for a number of years with the *New York Times* and covered both ground zero in the aftermath of 9/11 as well as the war overseas for a few years. I'd love to hear you talk a little about what led you to pursue journalism to begin with and how your experiences reporting after 9/11 shaped your perspective as a writer.

Amy Waldman: I finished college and didn't quite know what I wanted to do. I was interested in writing, film, but it was all fairly vague. And then I ended up moving to South Africa a year after graduation. First, I was volunteering there in a university—teaching and helping in other ways, and then I began doing some freelance reporting. It was 1992, 1993, so apartheid was ending. It was a very exciting time in the country's history, and so partly I felt like being a reporter gave me a way to go witness all of this, gave me a reason to be going to rallies and protests. I have a strong interest in social justice, so it was a way to write about things I cared about. I sort of felt like I backed into journalism a little bit. But then felt like, *Okay, this is what I want to do.*

I came back from South Africa, worked at the magazine *Washington Monthly*, then went to the *New York Times* and spent five years writing about New York City. And then 9/11. I was

in New York for about six weeks afterward covering the aftermath and then was sent overseas . . . I ended up in Afghanistan in November 2001, then went back repeatedly over the next few years. It was, obviously, a much more peaceful time there. There was a lot more freedom of movement. I went to Helmand and places that within a few years it was much more dangerous to go to. So I had, I think, a very personal, visceral sense of what was happening with the war because I had seen this window of optimism and openness, and then watched it closing.

I was actually briefly sent to Iraq after the invasion. And I think that was really informative for me, too—in registering all the ways that diverted resources and attention from Afghanistan, but also the sense of an occupation was much more palpable there. I think Afghanistan did have this identity much more as the ‘good war,’ and our reasons for being there were clearer. And yet, it helped me see certain parallels between Iraq and Afghanistan and our presence in both places. Also just watching things start to sour. In Iraq I felt them start to sour very quickly. I was there maybe two months at the most, and within that time I saw the change. Afghanistan, it was much slower – the disillusionment that built, among Afghans, but also my sense is even within the military, and for reporters as well. Even once I left the region I followed really closely what was happening with the war and our presence there and just felt very confused by it. I guess it’s the simplest way to put it. You know, more and more this sense that there was—and frankly is—no good solution to this, and that we hadn’t thought through where this was going.

I think that’s a very long way of saying that all of my post-9/11 experience fed into the first novel I wrote. *The Submission* is much more about America and how 9/11 changed us at home. I’m interested in, even in fiction, moral questions and the choices we have to make both as a society and individuals about how to answer these moral questions. The

first novel came out of reporting in America and reporting abroad and the ideas of: What did we want to be as a country in the wake of 9/11? What were our values? What should change? What should stay the same? And then for individuals, how did your personal, political, psychological history weigh into how you answer these questions?

I really loved Afghanistan as a country. I always loved going there. I loved the people that I met and people that I worked with. I was good friends with a lot of our interpreters there. I felt anguish about what I saw happening. [*A Door in the Earth*] is, in a way, another chapter of what I had started with the first novel: who we are at home. Afghanistan was where I wanted to try to understand who and what we are abroad.

I also felt like 9/11 created this whole new set of tropes and ideas and conditions about who we imagined ourselves to be. *Three Cups of Tea* I think was so popular because it fit into that idea of who we think we are. I was interested in idealism, even going back to when I went to South Africa as a young person. I kind of love that impulse in Americans, to want to go and help abroad. But I also think as I've gotten older I question it more and see it as much more complicated, and I don't have as clear a sense of how to think about it. Fiction for me is a good place to work out things that I don't know the answers to, or don't exactly know how to think about. So that all fed into this novel. That was a very long answer.

Lauren Johnson: I appreciate long answers because these are challenging things to think about, and I don't think there is an easy answer a lot of times. I heard that for *The Submission* the idea kind of lodged itself in your brain, and you had initially shelved it while you were working as a journalist. Then it wouldn't stop gnawing at you so you decided to listen to it, and you stopped working for the *Times* and wrote the novel. Was the seed for *A Door in the Earth* similar to that? Was it an obsession, for lack of better words?

Amy Waldman: Yeah, it actually was. I had not read *Three Cups of Tea*, and then Jon Krakauer published *Three Cups of Deceit* and 60 Minutes did its report, and I became completely obsessed with the entire thing. So I read *Three Cups of Tea* at that point. I wasn't even that interested in [Greg Mortenson] as a person or what his motivations were, I was more interested in why did so many people buy into this myth? What did that say about us? I felt like it got at something pretty deep, both in who we are as Americans, but also in the War on Terror, the war in Afghanistan. I couldn't easily articulate what that was, but I felt like it really went to the heart of something there. And then I also was really interested in what would it feel like to believe in this cause or this person and then find out that in all kinds of ways, it wasn't what you thought it had been.

I spent a lot of time online reading reactions from people after *Three Cups of Tea* was exposed. I was interested in the people who were really angry at Krakauer for exposing him—this idea that we need heroes, and it's wrong to tear them down, even if they're false heroes. But then I would find, say, a 14 year old girl who would be like, '*I'm crushed, because I really believed in this and raised money for this.*' What would that feel like to be that young and having this experience? I was trying to make sense of why was it so popular, why did the military latch on to it, and then what would it feel like to find out that basically you've hitched your idealism—which is a genuine feeling—to something that's false. I kept meeting people who said, '*Oh, I went into education because of that book,*' or '*My brother went to help in Pakistan because of that book.*' So, if something's not true but it's motivating people to help, that's really interesting as well. So anyway, it just seemed very messy and interesting. I usually feel like when I become obsessed with something, that's fertile territory for a novel.

Lauren Johnson: And why did you choose 2009 as a time frame in

particular?

Amy Waldman: Initially, I think I didn't have the novel set in any particular year. When I'm writing fiction I'm always torn, especially the kind of fiction I do—at least everything I've done so far—which is so obviously spun off reality in some way. I'm always torn about how specific do I want to get? In *The Submission*, I don't say it's 9/11. I left it vague in terms of what the attack in question was. I never use the term 9/11 or September 11 anywhere in the book, because I felt like it just takes you out of a fictional world into one that immediately you're thinking about all your associations and experiences with 9/11.

In this case, the more I thought about it and started looking at different points in the war, I just felt like it actually does matter to be specific. That year was so interesting to me, for all the reasons I weave into the novel: everything from Obama becoming president and rethinking the whole Afghanistan strategy, to the number of casualties of American soldiers rising, to growing public disenchantment at home. . . It really just felt like that was a pivotal year in the war. And so it seems a good pivot point to set the story when all of this is going on.

Lauren Johnson: And it's definitely rooted in reality. You mentioned a lot of things that took place that year, including the airstrike in Farah that led to massive civilian casualties, and the attack in Kunduz in November where the British reporter was kidnapped. I appreciated all those little reminders. And I think someone who maybe didn't have an obsession with that region in 2009-2010 would still pick up on those elements, that it feels very grounded.

Amy Waldman: Yes, but I think, equally though, someone who didn't know anything—in a way it wouldn't matter. It's almost like I'm speaking to you as a reader in one way and another reader in another way. I'm putting all those things in; to me,

it's exciting that you would get them and register them and their significance. But equally, I know there's a lot of readers who will not have paid any attention to any of those things. I kind of like tucking in reality into fiction. I like that people who get it will get it. But I also feel like, if you don't, that's fine, too. It doesn't matter if you never read the news about Afghanistan, I want it to affect you emotionally. Maybe there's a way putting it in fiction will do that, even if you turn off the news.

Lauren Johnson: Yeah, absolutely. It grounds it but also has those emotional reverberations, and I think particularly the way that you approach it from a new perspective. That's one of the things that I really appreciate about the book as a whole is all the different perspectives. You're not looking at this from the traditional whitewashed American lens that most people are used to viewing war through. You weave in all these different points of view against the backdrop of war that captures a fuller spectrum. There's Parveen—and I would love to hear more about your choice to make her your protagonist—and then all the colorful characters she interacts with along the way.

Amy Waldman: Originally there was going to be, I think, five different sections, and each would have a different central character. Aziz, the [military] interpreter, and Trotter [the American military commander] were going to have one section, and [Parveen] was going to have another section. But when I started working on it, it just didn't work. And so I ended up kind of folding everything into her story. And it really to me became about her story, but braided together with all these other people. I wanted someone young, because I feel like that is a point when you are more open to influences, and partly it's a novel about her wrestling with all these adult figures and mentors and influences, and kind of coming to terms with them.

The idea of a young American going abroad is a very familiar

story and has been done in fiction. I decided to make her Afghan-American, partly because I wanted her to have some understanding of the culture and speak the language. I feel like every American in some way has a place that they are connected to—it can be very immediate, it can be very distant—and they're sort of these ghost places for us where you imagine a strong connection. And then what happens when that's tested and you have to come face to face with real people? Also, I'm always very interested in people who are kind of caught in between. With her and Aziz, I felt like they were both in that situation. The question of allegiances: even if that's clear in your own mind, how do other people perceive you?

Lauren Johnson: You cover a really impressive spectrum. With Parveen herself, with the family she's staying with, Waheed's family, who are mostly just trying to exist and live their lives in this remote Afghan village, and then Colonel Trotter and these American soldiers who are also inspired by Gideon Crane's book and the "kind power" notion. And I'm glad you mentioned Aziz, I think he was my favorite character.

Amy Waldman: Oh, that makes me happy!

Lauren Johnson: I think interpreters don't get a lot of attention for the precarious position that they're in, straddling these different worlds and competing agendas. I really appreciated that perspective. But again, it's how you weave everyone all together. Parveen observes at one point that her "sympathies kept tilting back and forth, never finding a perfect place to rest." I have to say, that's how I felt throughout the book, not really comfortable aligning myself 100% with any character. And I think that's in large part because of all these different perspectives that you invite us to consider. Would you say that one of your messages is that there *is* no comfortable place to rest in war?

Amy Waldman: Yes. Although I'd maybe say there's no

comfortable place to rest in life!

Lauren Johnson: That's a fair edit!

Amy Waldman: But yes, I think that's true. When I was younger I was very certain about a lot of things, and I think I've become less and less so, which is often frustrating. There are things—and I could go on at great length—where I have a very strong sense of what's right and what's wrong, including in war. I mean, there's a lot happening right now in Afghanistan that I think is egregiously wrong. But that feeling you have is exactly what I wanted. That certainly in that situation there's nobody's saintly or perfect, whether that's because they're trying to survive or that's human nature. There shouldn't be a comfortable place to rest. Certainly in war.

Lauren Johnson: I grew up in the era of chick flicks where in 90 minutes someone falls in love and lives happily ever after; it's just this clean-cut story line. As I've gotten older I realized that's not the case, basically ever. And that's part of coming of age. To me, a lot of Parveen's experience read like a coming of age story also.

Amy Waldman: Yes.

Lauren Johnson: She's confronted with the fact that life isn't black and white, that there are shades of gray everywhere, and it's uncomfortable. Your decisions have ripple effects, and even if you're making them with good intentions, you can't count on them having positive outcomes.

Amy Waldman: The more I worked on this novel, that idea became something I thought about more and more. Just what do our actions do? In the name of whatever cause you believe in, how do you affect other people? That's the beauty of being alive—how interconnected we all are—but also it's very hard to live without having repercussions in the lives of others, whether you want to or not. And the gap between our ideas of ourselves in the world and our realities in the world interests me too.

How do you ever stand far enough outside yourself to even see how you affect others?

Lauren Johnson: Having not been back to the country in so long, you render the landscape so strikingly. And you also invite readers into this very intimate setting of an Afghan home, which is mostly closed off to us here in the West. I would love to hear more about how you were able to capture the spaces and characters authentically.

Amy Waldman: The landscape there made such an impression on me. Some of that just stayed with me, and then I certainly drew on the reporting I had done when I was there. There's little lines and things people said to me when I was a reporter that I probably wove into the book or gave me the seed for an idea. So I had that base for having spent time there, but it was very difficult not being able to—or, I should say, deciding not to—go back and research. Instagram I love for the visual reminders it provides, and there's so many photographers doing great work there. I read a lot of books, including *Afghan Post* [by Wrath-Bearing Tree co-editor Adrian Bonenberger]. There are quite a few documentaries that I watched, and I also did a lot of research on maternal mortality. I read [military blogs] for more logistical detail. Anthropology—there's not so much that's super recent just because of conditions, but there's enough to be really helpful. There's a lot out there. But it's not the same as going back.

Lauren Johnson: I'm glad you mentioned maternal mortality. Could you talk about why you chose to focus on that as one of the central issues? [Crane, the humanitarian, witnesses an Afghan woman's death in childbirth, and in response decides to build a clinic for women in her village]

Amy Waldman: Yes. So once I came up with the idea that, in a way, it's a book about a book—the influence of this memoir—I was trying to think, who is this person who wrote it? What was

he doing in this village? I don't remember exactly what the spark was for that, but as soon as I thought about it, it totally made sense. I mean, maternal mortality is a huge issue in Afghanistan, and it also was a way to get at one of the complicated things about this war, which is the whole issue of women. Are we there to save them or protect them? Is that a true reason or a pretext? And also the contradictions embedded in that—for example the way we've mostly allowed women to be left out of the peace process.

And so I wanted to see how those contradictions in America's relationship to women in Afghanistan would play out in the story I'd invented. What is PR and what is a legitimate desire to help? What is our obligation? I felt like it was a way for [Parveen] to connect with women in the village as well. And then all the complexities around—and again this came out of my reporting, some of it at least—who can treat women, medically, and how does that work? So, it just seemed like the issue to build the novel around.

Lauren Johnson: And one of the other ways that Parveen ends up connecting with the women in the village is in reading them Crane's book, which is such an interesting layer. She quickly realizes that events and descriptions in the book don't line up with the reality of the people who were living it. Aside from that, the moments in those scenes where we get to see the women interacting away from the men and their daily routines was a really powerful image. They take their burqas off and they're teasing each other, and harping on their husbands, talking about sex; just women being women. I think that's an important element, too, that gets lost in the politicized discussions of war: just people being people and the connective power of that.

Amy Waldman: I definitely wanted to have that. I would say the war was the thing that propelled the novel into existence, and yet I didn't want it only to be about that. And I did feel strongly that all the reasons I really loved Afghanistan, I

wanted to try to get some of that across. And, you know, people everywhere are just funny and saucy and smart. Someone once said to me that it's much easier to focus on the differences with people in other cultures than it is the similarities. That was probably in the context of being a reporter, but I think it's true in fiction too, that it's very easy to exoticize everything that's different or extreme in another culture. But the truer portrait is capturing at least some of ways that people are quite similar anywhere: their friendships, their relationships, their desires—all of that.

Lauren Johnson: Were any of the moments that occur in the book echoes of experiences you had in Afghanistan?

Amy Waldman: Good question. Funny, at this point it's so hard to even sort everything out. There are things that were not experiences, but were taken from the news. [One incident, removed to avoid spoilers] is based on this tiny, one paragraph news item that I found years ago . . . that's always really haunted me. Frankly, the Konduz incident—the translator who died was someone I was really close to and had worked with, so that never went away for me. I had very strong feelings about it and wanted it not forgotten. And then there would just be little things. Like when Waheed says to Parveen, "You know, I wish my wives could do what you do." When I was in a Pashtun area reporting, this man said that to me: "I wish my wife could do what you do." I just never expected to hear that there.

There are little things that in one way or another either are my experience or things I read. [I read a paper] about the relationship between Israel and the Palestinians, the psychology of an occupation, and that fed into my thinking: this idea of, is an old man just an old man or is he dangerous? What does it mean to be an occupying power? As the fear increases, how do you start to interact with the population? I feel like that's a central tension of our presence there: Supposedly trying to help and win hearts and

minds, and yet we're also terrified and have no idea who to trust. How do those things coexist with each other?

Lauren Johnson: I actually wrote down a line where Parveen wonders: "What did it mean to offer help to people you don't trust?"

Amy Waldman: Exactly.

Lauren Johnson: That was certainly something on my mind when I was there, and I'm sure many of my compatriots as well. That really complicated mixture of the inherent power that comes with being an American military member, but also the vulnerability that comes with it, and just the pervasive lack of knowledge and understanding, and then the rules that are being dictated by people who aren't actually on the ground—and you captured that web in really kind of an appropriately discombobulating way.

Amy Waldman: That's interesting, that idea that you are not making the rules. And also that, in this novel, and it seemed to me there, like the rules were always changing.

Lauren Johnson: Yeah, absolutely.

Amy Waldman: I think for most Americans and Afghans that's incredibly confusing. Because there's no consistent relationship. And even as a soldier, you're still a human being, and you're told one day to perceive the people in this place a certain way, and the next day you're told to perceive them in a different way. How are you supposed to reconcile that internally as well as externally in your actions and your reactions?

Lauren Johnson: Right. And how are you supposed to inspire trust in an interaction when you're going in with body armor and two weapons and ballistic sunglasses and fourteen ton vehicles? So many paradoxes inherent in war.

Amy Waldman: Yes, paradox is the word.

Lauren Johnson: The fact that this war has now been going on for 18 years, I think it's fitting that this is not a book that wraps up neatly at the end. Parveen has this great line that it is "a war shaggy with loose ends." Which does not satisfy my idealistic American desire for happy ending, but it's also very appropriate. Was that a conscious decision?

Amy Waldman: Yes. It was hard for me to imagine a happy ending, to be honest. I think this is a very slow moving, epic tragedy and it's gotten so much worse—for Afghans, in particular, in the past few years. I just felt like the most honest ending was one that was unresolved . . . It's more just, we have to think about these things. We can't just be congratulating ourselves all the time on being the saviors of the world. Not that we really are any more. In some ways I feel like I'm writing about history more than the present.

[I also want to] touch on the role anger, for lack of a better word, played in the writing of *A Door in the Earth*. So many things about the war that were treated as normal—the lies or withholding of information; the false rhetoric about success or victory in the war; the sending of soldiers on missions or to outposts that made no sense or seemed destined to fail; the loss of life on both sides, of both soldiers and civilians, and the lack of questioning whether those deaths, or lifelong injuries, were a cost worth paying—seemed wrong to me, and the novel was a way to work through that. I think one problem with the civilian-military divide is that civilians don't think they have the right to ask these kinds of questions, because we're not serving, when for me that's the reason we're obligated to ask them.

Lauren Johnson: These two novels, it seems, very organically fed into each other. Do you think you'll stay in that zone, about the aftereffects of 9/11? Or is that still to be determined?

Amy Waldman: I think it's to be determined. I mean, sometimes I think there must be a trilogy. It seems like these things always come in threes, but I don't know what the third one would be. And I definitely don't want to force it. Both these books really just came out of, as we talked about, kind of obsessions. And so, I feel like if I don't have another obsession, I will not write another novel along those lines. I might write another novel, but it would be totally different. And yet, I clearly am consumed by post-9/11 America and the War on Terror. And since it never seems to end, I guess eventually there may be another novel. But I would rather it all ended and then I could write about something else.

Lauren Johnson: Do you ever see yourself going back to journalism?

Amy Waldman: I don't think I would go back to the kind of journalism I was doing. I could see doing more essay writing. I keep thinking about how to write about what's going on now . . . The Afghan deaths, both soldiers and civilians, and the numbers—how extreme that has become. And also the number of airstrikes the US is now carrying out there, and how little information there is about that—I think that's what's really disturbing, that it almost becoming this secret war where we just have very little sense of what's going on and who's doing what. But I don't want to write a novel about that. It would be more an essay or op-ed. So that's a long way of saying I don't know.

Lauren Johnson: Well you can be sure that I will be reading everything you ever write from now on.

Happy Birthday, Afghanistan

October 08, 2019

The war in Afghanistan is now old enough to go to war in Afghanistan.

Yesterday the war in Afghanistan, first to fall under the catchall designation of the Global War on Terror (GWOT), turned 18 years old, meaning that individuals who were not yet born when it started are now old enough to deploy in it.

Growing up, 18 is one of those birthdays you look forward to so much. It means freedom, emancipation from parental oversight. It means cigarettes and lottery tickets. It means taking part in the democratic process. It means tattoos.

The war is not much different.

Freedom is certainly at the forefront of its goals. 18 years ago it began its existence as Operation Enduring Freedom and it continues (since 2015) as Operation Freedom's Sentinel. At this point there have probably been more cigarettes smoked by US troops than rounds fired. Notably absent from this new longest war is the draft lottery, a staple of the previous longest conflict, The Vietnam War.

As for the democratic process, Afghanistan has gotten it, or a version of it, since the US removal of the Taliban in 2001, having held three parliamentary elections and just completed their fourth presidential election (though the results are still unknown, partly due to ongoing violence, low turn-out, and the usual allegations of corruption).

And tattoos? Well, tattoos are just ink filled scars, and 18 years of war have left plenty of those.

I don't much remember my 18th birthday. I'm sure it was rather

unremarkable, taking place during midterms of my senior year in high school, the year we got new US history textbooks that included the September 11th attacks.

It wasn't until two months later that I got my first tattoo, and I didn't move out of my parents' house until five months later. I wouldn't enlist until two months after my 19th birthday, and with full-scale ground wars now in two countries, it was clear that I'd be deploying, especially having joined the infantry.



I received my orders to deploy to Afghanistan on October 2, 2005, just before the war turned four. By this age, much of the country's attention was turned to its younger sibling, the War in Iraq. I went to war just after my 20th birthday.

When I got home in 2006, people constantly asked me what it was like in Iraq. They still do. This was the beginning of the realization that my war would be forgotten, but I never imagined it would reach this scale.

Over the past 18 years, less than half of one percent of this

country's population has served in the military. An even smaller percentage has deployed, and of that group even fewer saw combat. The nature of the war in Afghanistan, like the official operational name, has changed. But war is war and US troops are still dying.

According to [DOD's most recent report](#) (October 7, 2019), there have been 1,893 US troops killed in action in Afghanistan since the start of the conflict. 60 of those have come under the banner of Operation Freedom's Sentinel, which allegedly marked the end of combat operations in the country. There have been another 405 "non-hostile" deaths, and another 20,582 wounded in action. This is to say nothing of the US contractors or Afghan and allied forces KIA and WIA, or the veterans who have died since returning from the war, be it from complications to war injuries or from suicide.

Or the Afghan civilians whose freedom we are supposed to be sentinels of.

Questions I'm consistently faced with as a veteran of Afghanistan include: Was it worth it? Would you do it again? Should we leave? Did we win? How do we win?

The question of worth is a difficult one for me. Can we say anything is worth the number of lives that have been lost? More to the point, can we really make that judgment while we're still in the thick of it?

Personally, yes, I would again answer my nation's call and attempt to protect those whose position demands protection. Was it worth the injuries, physical and moral? Again, it's hard to say in the thick of it, but when I hear that a combat outpost my team opened was closed just a few years later, or that a city we helped clear of the Taliban has fallen back under their control, it's harder to say.

Should we leave? Absolutely. The challenge is *how* we leave. And I don't have the answer. When the Soviets left in 1989

(after just 9 years of war), they did so under a cloud of atrocities committed. In some cases they just up and left, leaving behind equipment, mortars and tanks that I would patrol past 17 years later. They left a physical and political mess behind them. We can't do the same. For the sake of the people of Afghanistan and the US troops who served there, we mustn't. The feeling of futility, that our actions and sacrifices were entirely inconsequential, is one of the contributing factors to the rise of suicide among veterans.

The last question is the crux of it all. What can we call winning? Does the fact that the OEF designation ended mean that we secured enduring freedom? Is it only enduring because we are still there as its sentinel? One of the reasons this question is so hard to answer is a lack of missional clarity from 18 years ago.

The Taliban was removed from power. That was not the end of the war. Osama bin Laden was killed. The war went on. The Afghan people democratically elected a second president. Still we were there. We declared an end to combat operations. US troops are still dying in combat.

But if my 18th birthday was unremarkable, the Afghan war's is even more so. Especially when considered in the context of national discourse. There was no Facebook reminder that October 7th was OEF's birthday. There was no corresponding fundraiser.

Rather, the occasion was largely marked by attention being paid to yet another younger sibling: Syria. Headlines, television news, and online platforms were dominated by the administration's latest GWOT decision to remove troops from a younger war. And it is unsurprising.

While withdrawing troops from Afghanistan has been given lip service in debates over the past few election cycles, nothing of substance has been done. During the confirmation for

Secretary of Defense Mark Esper, not a single question was asked about Afghanistan. It took two hours for the incoming Secretary of the Army to be asked a question about Afghanistan during his confirmation.

President Trump didn't even mention Afghanistan on its war's birthday. The closest he came was tweeting, "I was elected on getting out of these ridiculous endless wars..." But this was clearly in response to criticism of the Syria decision.

No mention of the war that was voted most likely to be endless.